

Ya-bunanma-m-a-ta-ta: WHAT I SEE WHEN I DREAM

07.09.–02.11.2024

Opening: 06.09.2024, 6–9 p.m.

A night at a gallera, somewhere on the outskirts of a dusty, provincial town. The crowd gathers around the cockpit, voices raised, sweaty faces flickering in the electric light, waiting for the fight to begin. It is a predominantly male, overtly masculine, scene, with each contender, and the viewers, assuming their pre-established parts. The men attend to their cocks, preparing them carefully, gingerly even, only to suddenly release them into the ring. The cocks jump at each other, male on male, with jolting, violent movements that nevertheless resemble a dance. It all lasts but an instant, the crowd cheering the victor on.

The protagonist approaches, disguised as one of the contenders, dressed up (or down if you prefer) as a macho, a tough guy, dragging heavily on his cigar. He picks up the fallen cock, cradles it into his arms, tenderly. Thus begins Elyla's film *A prayer for tending death (Una oración para acompañar la muerte)*, a fever dream, an odyssey into the minds of men, into the patriarchal setup of a ritualized sport turned on its head. Their studied movements through the set – a metaphor for real life – end up highlighting the artifice at play, its normativity. More surprisingly, perhaps, they transform a scene of violence enthused by hypermasculinity into the domain of play.

But a ritual must be performed beforehand, and thus, the artist / performer / activist / intermediary / cook serves as a conduit between worlds, tapping into ancestral knowledge, bringing forth a feast for their fellow travelers. The cock, rescued from the pit, becomes an offering, the key element in an act of transmutation. Soon enough, it will be consumed as part of a celebratory feast, its feathers used as adornments, opening up the senses, leaning into dance. The last scene from the film shows Elyla at the center of a tableau vivant, surrounded by a sisterhood of extravagantly dressed dames, in an evanescent yet powerful celebration of cochona (queer) dissidence.

The piece connects to Elyla's long-term research into ancestral communal practices from their home region of Chontales and from the Pacific Coast of the territory referred to as Nicaragua, exploring performance and ritual through their popular manifestations and at the intersection with queerness, seeking to activate an anticolonial and decolonial praxis. The cock, observed through its potent associations with uninhibited masculinity, becomes the symbolic and formal device through which a quasi-alchemical process is activated whereby gender and societal norms are subverted. An "alquimia marica," as expressed by the artist, a means to transmute matter and con-

vert violence into pleasure, aggression into affection, hatred into love. It is no accident, of course, that such gestures are deemed necessary in a context that has been ridden by violence, inter-generationally. And, as Elyla shows, it has been specific bodies, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, female identifying, queer and non-binary, that have suffered the brunt of its force. Gender norms were strictly regimented within colonial regimes, and remain a root cause for systemic violence perpetrated against dissident bodies, unruly individuals, shunned by society.

The present exhibition brings to view a range of installation and multimedia work by Elyla, centered around *A prayer for tending death (Una oración para acompañar la muerte)*, and complemented by *Mirroring Lengger Gallogallina (Espejo Lengger Gallogallina)* subtitled "A Trans-Oceanic Decolonial Ritual for Ancestral Corpodivinities" (2024). Shot in lush color and resplendent light, *Mirroring Lengger Gallogallina* presents two protagonists engaged in a fight turned game of seduction. At first, they enter the ring with great panache, gloriously done up, flaunting their feathers, confidently armed with sharp spurs. Gradually, they abandon themselves into dance. The calculated, carefully expressed movements and poses carry deep histories however, not least as they are embodied by two queer persons. Fire, a purifying element, brings the two parties together in an exchange of fragrant offerings, flowers, nearing an embrace.

The piece was produced in collaboration with Otniel Tasman, an artist and a Lengger Lanang dancer from Central Java, Indonesia. A long-established practice, Lengger dance involves cross-dressing and incorporates precisely executed elements combining the feminine and masculine, transgressing prescribed gender norms. Furthermore, Elyla's interest in performance writ large, connects with their research into dance, fiestas, and carnival traditions from Nicaragua, ranging from the formal, highly structured, El Güegüense to the more spontaneous, unscripted Torovenado, both of which are rooted in anticolonial resistance. The choreography presented in the film thus references elements of traditional dance performance from two greatly removed geographical regions which nonetheless converge through their shared colonial past.

Both films bring together human, animal and plant life, harnessing an interspecies awareness, building upon connections that extend beyond the immediate. The chicken is a perfect example in this sense, since the species originated in Southeast Asia and was

brought to the Abya Yala by Dutch and Portuguese slave traders. Recent research however shows that Polynesian travelers had in fact brought the birds to the Pacific Coast of the soon-to-become 'New World' at least a century before Columbus' arrival. This story of multiple origins and intercultural exchange enables Elyla to establish a trans-Pacific kinship, countering dominant Eurocentric narratives, by-passing 1492.

Cockfighting remains a controversial cultural practice, with a complex history, and has been restricted or banned in several countries due to concerns around animal rights and cruelty. "Pelea de gallos" nevertheless remains common in Nicaragua, and other parts of Latin America, where it has been staged since the 16th century, brought in from Spain. The cock is the unifying motif across the films and sculptural installations included in the exhibition, however its presence is never gratuitous, always revered. In *Cocksparty (Fiesta de Gallosgallinas)* (2024), feathers embolden a double entendre, turning an unruly affair into something that more closely resembles play, a show-off instead of a showdown, caught athletically mid-air. *Altar of sacred deaths (Altar de muertes sagradas)* (2024) on the other hand, returns to the notion of ritual, whereby the empty cage with golden rice grains and corn scattered underneath signals abundance, connecting once again to ideas around transmutation.

Taking traditional cockfights in Nicaragua and Indonesia as their starting point, the works included in the exhibition explore transnational and transoceanic South-South connections, seeking to articulate, in the artist's words: "a pathway for trans-border anticolonial queer solidarity." There is something both rebellious, and curative about these processes, where the aim is to build community, to hone in one's strength. These are stories borne out of struggle, have no doubt, but they are meant to also soothe and nourish, to bring some sense of ease, and to enable alternate futures, a queer utopia. As beautifully expressed by José Esteban Muñoz, we can "feel it [queerness] as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality." "[...] queerness," he continued, "exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future." Yet that future might already be here. Elyla's work articulates queerness in an active sense, going beyond its ideality, always becoming while also "palpable," since it already exists in the popular realm, resoundingly alive, "en la calle," on the street, where it has survived, and thrived against all odds. The task of the queer body, what it might accomplish through healing,

Elyla explains, is precisely that act of transmutation, countering violence, reactivating memory through gesture, ritual, performance and dance.

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